Other End of the Stick

Harness—"Locked."
"Locked."
Landing gear—"Three down and locked."
"Three down and locked."

By LCdr. John D. Sullivan

It was a typical week at the VT training command, that place we all hated until you actually got on the other end of the stick. Instructor-pilot (IP) duty was awesome for me as a helo bubba. The job was so drastically different from the e-mail barrages and stacks of paperwork that we all know and love. Being an IP is addictive for a pilot and really is rewarding, particularly as you send on an on-wing or any student whom you taught from scratch. To this day though, I won't admit to my 14 on-wings that I enjoyed every minute of it.

I was about a third of the way through my tour, and I was one of our three schedule writers. We worked in a three-week rotation for one of three flights and scheduled about 50 pilots and students. In this situation, the skeds officer usually is limited to one 2.0 bag a day. The problem is, when you start to write for that week, you are either the early-morning or a late-evening player. I always preferred the early bag, so I could get out of work at a decent hour and avoid the Milton traffic to my house in Pensacola.

My predecessor had scheduled me for a Monday-night bag. I came in and worked the schedule for the flight and started to figure how I could rotate back to my desired early-morning brief. I could take a flight that met the SOP and work the early morning schedule. That option meant I would finish my night fam and be back at 0700 for a brief with an on-paper 10 hours of crew rest.

For some unknown reason, we both had called the gear down when it still was up.

Unfortunately, my flight is what we call a chain-of-command flight. Yes, it's a new Air Force term, which means any flight leader, or senior skeds officer, can fly someone's on-wing when the primary instructor is on leave for an extended period of time. While this practice is a necessary evil, it prevents a student from getting behind the power curve.

Well, the night radio-instrument (RI) flight went a bit rough, and we needed to really talk. So, the well-planned, quick debrief turned into an hour-long, step-by-step, painful debrief—a worthwhile effort, as the student naval aviator (SNA) did significantly better on his next flight. After the debrief, I began my trek home through cosmopolitan Milton.

When I finally got home, it didn't take long to crash out. However, before I fell asleep, I made a quick call to push back my morning brief to make sure we weren't within the 10-hour window per our SOP. After my required 10 hours, I awoke and headed to the squadron. I got stuck behind some tourist or retiree going 10 mph below the speed limit. I finally got to the squadron and went to the line shack.

After our brief, we walked to the bird. The mission was a C4202, which is a FAM-10 for those of us who remember before-joint-services training. This flight usually was my hell ride for my on-wings, but we kept it basic this day. My student was having a rough day anyway, not surprising because he had sat for eight days. As we know, it's difficult to stay proficient at that point in training.

We stepped through everything item-for-item. After the first pass at lovely Brewton, he already had scored an optional warmup, but, of course, he didn't know it. The landing put a kink in my back that took a while to straighten out. For the earlier flight, the new syllabus calls for the introduction of the low-altitude power loss (LAPL), so the procedure was fair game; we thoroughly had discussed it in the brief.

Here is where the scenario went south. The first time, I pulled back on the power and said the horrible word we all hate—"simulated"—all I saw was a frozen figure in the front seat, as we dove straight for the deck. I recovered the bird and waved off the scenario to demonstrate the maneuver. We redid all the demos at every point in the pattern. After all that, we discussed what happened and decided it was time for a try from the front.

His second attempt was "simulated," and, again, he froze like a mime to another recovery and waveoff. Any other day, I would have called it quits, but I really wanted this guy to get it down. After two more frustrating attempts, I took the controls and decided I needed a landing. I turned final and went through the checklist, which, of course, rolled off the tongue.

Harness—"Locked."

"Locked."

Landing gear—"Three down and locked."

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We rolled out at about 500 yards. Suddenly, my brain broke the monotony, slapped my dopey ass, and said, "Hey idiot, check again."

For some unknown reason, we both had called the gear down when it still was up. I tried to avoid saying it, but I blurted out an inappropriate, "Three down and @#$%%!"

I then did what I should have done the first time. I powered-up and waved it off at the same time our ever-so-vigilant, runway-duty officer radioed me. We headed home and landed.

I had met the minimum crew rest and pushed back my brief, but canceling the event would have been the best answer. We all get into a rhythm, particularly in the fleet. I should have stayed on the night schedule, versus pulling the switch. After that day, no matter what else happened throughout my IP duty, I would do something, well, stupid, every few weeks, however minor. We all have these lapses; it's a measure of whether we recognize it or not, although never quite to the degree of this story. We all unknowingly perform in one extreme or another; complacency puts us there—one second from a mishap. I had more than 1,200 hours in model before this flight.

Let's face it, I am a helo bubba, to the core, and a good fixed-wing instructor, but we all are susceptible to mistakes on any given day. If we were perfect, there would be no reason for this magazine, right?

LCdr. Sullivan flies with HSL 42. He was flying T-34s with VT-2 at Whiting Field at the time of the incident.